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Is Green the New Red: Cultural perspectives on ecological civilization

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Briefs | Analyses

China: an ecological civilisation?

The new Chinese ideology?

Preserving the environment in the Chinese countryside

Jessica Imbach

[EURICS fellow, autumn 2020]

Jessica Imbach is a postdoc and lecturer at the University of Zurich, where she was awarded the annual dissertation prize in 2018 for her PhD thesis on modern Chinese ghost literature. Her research is situated at the intersection of Chinese Studies and the Environmental Humanities and explores Chinese science fiction, internet literature, A.I. culture, and related discourses of Chinese futurology within the context of the Chinese state's vision of "ecological civilisation" as well as the environmental crisis narratives of the Anthropocene.



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IS GREEN THE NEW RED?

Cultural perspectives on "ecological civilisation"

In his recent speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Xi Jinping called on world leaders to join China's "green revolution" and announced China's bold timeline to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. Xi's announcement not only marks China's ambition to promote itself as a global climate leader. It is also representative of how visions of a green future have been continuously gaining significance within China's political discourse over the last two decades. Promoted through the conceptual framework of ecological civilisation (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明), this vision emphasises the importance of environmental thought within the Chinese cultural body to chart a path towards sustainable development. It also serves the strategic promotion of China as a cultural alternative to the West. The concept of "ecological civilisation" has been interpreted as a Chinese response to climate change. However, it has come under scrutiny for promoting divisive politics of cultural difference that aggressively pits Chinese nature-centred traditions against the polluting and "black" economic models of the West. In addition, Xi Jinping's repeated use of catchy aphorisms such as "blue rivers and green mountains are mountains of silver and gold" has been accompanied by an ever more overt display of Maoist history and calls to draw on socialism as a "red resource" (*hongse ziyuan* 红色资源). The increasingly repressive cultural environment faced by Chinese artists, activists and academics raises questions. Can the concept of ecological civilisation generate productive cultural engagements with environmental and public health issues? Or is it just green rhetoric for red politics?

"Green China": a new civilisational project?

Ecological civilisation emerged as a central policy framework in Chinese political discourse during the period of leadership transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping (2012 to 2013). Since then, the concept has been expounded in numerous state documents and scholarly publications. At its core lies a dialectical materialist argument that ecology represents the next historic step of civilisational development, following agricultural and industrial civilisation. As such, it not only aims to reconcile China's economic growth with environmental pro-

Within China's state-monitored public discourse, cultural difference is increasingly instrumentalised, pitting Chinese ecological "wisdom" against an "overindulgent" lifestyle in the West

a socialist society. Xi Jinping's speeches stress that environmental progress requires citizens to internalise values such as frugality and respect for nature. Yet, despite often being referred to as socialist ecological civilisation its emergence has not only to do with theoretical debates in China, but also with the custom of Chinese leaders to attach their name to distinct civilisational projects. For instance, Deng Xiaoping, who is mostly known in the West as the architect of the transition to a socialist market economy in the 1980s, promoted "material civilisation" (*wuzhi wenming* 物质文明) and "spiritual civilisation" (*jingshen wenming* 精神文明).

Chinese ecological "wisdom"

Idiosyncrasies of Chinese political culture notwithstanding, the concept has taken on more than just a rhetorical role. It also extends beyond green policies and sustainable investment. One important reason for this is that it emerged alongside the new geo-historical epoch of Anthropocene, which has spurred widespread debates on humanity's impact on Earth's biosphere. It has also generated reflections on place-bound and cultural differences in the interaction between society and the environment (e.g. the influence of Buddhism and Daoism on ecological practices). At the same time, within China's state-monitored public discourse, cultural difference is increasingly instrumentalised for soft power initiatives and related unofficial cultural enterprises that pit Chinese ecological "wisdom" against an "overindulgent" lifestyle in the West. An example of this dynamic is the case of the D.I.Y. vlogger Li Ziqi. With twelve million subscribers on YouTube, her very meticulously produced videos on traditional craftsmanship and life in the countryside are suffused with a pastoral romanticism that not only finds an audience in China and abroad, but also aligns with Xi Jinping's new era ideology and its appeal to cultural workers "to tell China's story well" (*jianghao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事).

Creative responses to the government's green slogans

The situation gets more complex whenever such stories touch on pollution and public health issues. While official campaigns emphasise that a "beautiful China" benefits citizens' well-being, environmental activism is often given very little leeway outside of government-sponsored initiatives.

tection but also designates a new world-historic stage centred on ecological values and practices. The term *wenming* itself is a modern concept that entered China via Japan at the beginning of the 19th century. It was initially adopted by Chinese intellectuals to resist the West's military aggression by asserting an Eastern civilisational project, but since the reform and opening period *wenming* often designates civilised conduct in

However, various artists have responded to the government's green slogans in creative ways. Zhao Liang's projects, for instance, play on the state's exhortation of China's natural beauty by adding elements drawn from the toxic realities, in which many citizens continue to live. In his photographic works, he creates visually stunning panoramas by combining a traditional Chinese landscape aesthetic with images of landfills, dead fish, and polluted water. Environmental art has also been shown in mainstream venues such as the Power Station of Art in Shanghai, where Cai Guoqiang held his highly mediatized solo exhibition *The Ninth Wave* (2014). Among the show's many monumental attractions was a large fishing boat carrying realistic sculptures of fatigued or dying exotic animals down the Huangpu River. These art shows can take place because they draw a comparatively small and elite urban audience. By contrast, the viral success of Chai Jing's air pollution documentary *Under the Dome* (*Qiongdong zhi xia* 穹顶之下, 2015) was one important reason it was swiftly taken offline. Nevertheless, before being censored, Chai's movie was praised by China's environmental protection Minister Chen Jining.

Despite continuously shifting ideological boundaries, the environmental crisis maintains a central role in contemporary Chinese culture production. This is particularly visible in the case of science fiction. As a state promoted sector of the Chinese creative industry, science fiction reflects the symbolic and economic importance of science and technology to China's growth and self-image. But this alignment with state interests has also enabled science fiction to address difficult topics more directly. A case in point is Frant Gwo's enormously successful science fiction movie *The Wandering Earth*, which came out in 2019 and dramatises climate change as an apocalyptic threat to humankind. Inevitably, various official news outlets offered nationalist interpretations of the movie as a showcase of China's ability to "save Earth" better than the U.S. However, the movie also generated wider public debate on China's self-representation against the horizon of its growing role in global climate change mitigation.

Beyond black, green, and red

Colour symbolism played an important role during the Maoist era, when counter-revolutionaries were branded as "black" devils and ghost. Today, blackness no longer refers to ideological contamination, but to the physical pollution caused by China's rapid industrialisation which is frequently seen as underpinned by a dangerous Westernisation of Chinese culture. In this sense, ecological civilisation parallels similar ethno-nationalist discourses of China's "rejuvenation" under Xi. However, to conclude that ecological civilisation is nothing but a green rhetorical veil for a reddening culture politics fails to consider how ecological civilisation emerged alongside, and often in productive tension with, wider local and transnational reflections on China's role in the Anthropocene.

To go further

Read [Jessica Imbach's](#) article in French on [eurics.eu](#)

Yulia Mylnikova

[EURICS Fellow, autumn 2020]

TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL COUNTRYSIDE?

What is the impact of “ecological civilisation” on the dynamics between urban and rural areas?

In the Chinese cultural and political tradition, there is a strong presence of pair concepts and of dichotomies. One of them is city/village: opposite in their ways of life and their relations with nature. Nowadays, this dichotomy is very complex and sharp, as the previous period of high-speed economic development created a huge gap in the urban-rural relations. 41.5% of the Chinese population lives in rural areas, some 583 million people (FAO, 2018). Within the framework of “ecological civilisation,” the relationship between cities and villages is fundamental. If China wants to have a society structured around ecological principles, urban dwellers will need to be fed by food grown in cities and in the bioregions around them. As it was stressed at the World Rural Revitalisation Conference that took place in China last month, China is beginning to rethink the very concepts of “urban” and “rural.” There is an attempt to restructure urban life so that food needs are met regionally. As we all know, agriculture has a crucial role to play in the face of climate change.



How does “ecological civilisation” work in rural areas?

Associate professor of Chinese History and director of the Confucius Institute at St Petersburg University, **Yulia Mylnikova** is specialised in China and global cultural histories. Her research focuses on ecological civilisation and environmental studies, the movement of constructive postmodernism, Dunhuang and the Silk Road. She is also interested in the contemporary cultural phenomena of Chinese theatre, art and festivals. Outside the academic world, Yulia Mylnikova works as well in the spheres of the theatre and the arts as a creative producer and curator.

China still has thousands of traditional villages and hundreds of millions of farmers who continue doing small intensive and meticulous farming. These remote villages, located in the interior parts of the country, now have to focus on helping nature to create and maintain ecosystems that will increase in complexity, diversity and richness over time. They need to solve problems related to waste-free production of agricultural products and to waste disposal. One of the most urgent issues is the recycling of organic materials: crop waste, human habitation waste and pigs and poultry feces. The President of the China Animal Agriculture Association, Li Xirong, recently stressed that many villages in China are literally littered with waste and human feces, and that land and water are polluted by sewage.

Villages adjacent to cities benefit in part from urban dynamics and develop faster than remote villages. They will develop faster than remote villages in terms of public utilities, water supply, sewerage, wastewater treatment plants and public transportation systems. However, they face many challenges: they experience a strong environmental impact of urban enterprises (industrial emissions, air and water poisoning, and so on). The main orientation of their agricultural production is to provide fresh produce for the immediate needs of the city.

Seven million people are considered as “returning to village entrepreneurs.” Who are they? What push them to “go back” to the village?

People who leave cities for remote or suburban villages can be divided roughly into three categories. The first category is made up of idealists, driven by environmental awareness and an understanding of our interdependence with other life forms and with the planet as a whole. They intend to engage in environmentally friendly agriculture, to clean up the environment and to adopt waste-free technology. The second category of people, as I understand it, is seriously concerned about health issues, healthy way of life, food security and food quality. A growing middle class wants a pure green produc-



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tion. They can do organic farming themselves, or they enter a cooperation with farmers to provide their families organic products. And the third category is business: pure entrepreneurs. These are people who, for some reason, were not satisfied in the urban environment and who decide to move to a village. They might be nostalgic, longing for the restoration of the traditional life of Chinese villages so brilliantly depicted in classical Chinese poetry...

My hypothesis is that these entrepreneurs come to the village motivated by the lure of profit. So do the so-called idealists. The central and provincial government are now investing huge funds to support eco-agriculture projects and development of waste-free technologies. Of course, this is only a general tendency, each person has a set of desires, ideas, principles. Some people do have nostalgia or are driven by ethical principles, but they also need funds for their innovative creative projects... When people from the second category successfully develop their own projects, it drifts towards business as well.

What kinds of projects do these “back to the village entrepreneurs” develop?

There are many examples. Shi Yan, known as China’s organic farming pioneer, has, for instance, founded the first “Community supported agriculture farm” in China. In Beijing, 600 families buy organically produced meat and vegetables from Shi Yan’s farm. It is local consumption: the 15 hectares of land (rented for 20 years) are located in the Tongzhou district of Beijing. There is no intermediary: every week, the products are delivered directly from the farm to the members.

Another example that comes to my mind is Yang Zhengxi (known as You Niuge) who works on creating a “seed bank.” In 2012, he resigned from his position as a local Party se-

cretary and began to collect agricultural species in various townships of Liping County. In three years, he spent almost all of his family’s savings and collected nearly 200 agricultural species, including about 60 native rice varieties, unique to south-east Guizhou.

A textbook case of these “back to the village entrepreneurs” could also be He Jianzeng, known in China as the “IT farmer.” In 2004, at the age of 33, He Jianzeng left a well-paid IT position in Shenzhen to return to his hometown in Shanxi. He started the exploration of the organic farming model. In the following years, he not only developed his own organic Hengrong Farm, but also established a Gengdu University for teaching intellectual farming (*Farming and Reading University* 耕读大学) and training “new farmers” (*xin nongren* 新农人). His motto is “reorganise the entire life and production cycle in the village to achieve zero waste zero pollution and zero garbage.”

I plan to go to China to do an ethnographic research on the transition to agro-ecological practices in different provinces. My hypothesis is that the Chinese have adopted the concept of ecological civilisation. China knows how to restructure its whole society: it has done it several times in the last hundred years. China has, I think, the assets and capabilities to carry out this green revolution.

To go further

Read **Yulia Mylnikova**’s article in French and turn to additional references on **eurics.eu**

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Inspired by the model of the Institutes for Advanced Study in Human and Social Sciences, EURICS hosts high-level scholars for a period ranging from three to ten months. EURICS supports a multidisciplinary research approach, aiming to seize both mechanisms and motivations of the evolution that marked not only the traditional Chinese culture in its diversity, but also the political, economic and societal transformations that shaped China’s long history.

Moreover, EURICS encourages collaborative research and analysis on current dynamics such as environmental transition, population ageing, urbanisation, migrations, social inequalities, learning society, cultural change, economic transformations, as well as on China’s international and regional role.

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